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CARING IN OLD AGE

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Care should not be seen only from the point of view of health but also take into consideration the totality of the individual. “the economic, social, cultural, environmental and behavioural factors are reliable predictors on how well both individuals age”.

“It is crucial that social and health services promote independence and assist older persons to participate fully in all aspects of society”.

Moreover, care should be seen as a continuum spread over the life course.

Furthermore “promoting health and well-being over the entire life course requires an inter-sectoral approach”.

The Regional Implementation Strategy recognises four main key players/ stakeholders in the provision of care for those older persons who are in such need.

- The Family**
- The State**
- The formal carers**
- Older persons themselves**

Until recently, in various countries, aging was perceived as an issue to be resolved by the family.

Many governments depended on the traditional role of the family for the welfare of their elderly population.

Very often, the family unit was taken as a convenient means of shouldering the sole burden in the family care and financial support of older relatives in need.

Moreover, family care-giving was often considered as a free resource, and something to be taken for granted.

The family care-giver was often neglected by the prevailing formal social system.

He was only provided care in extreme cases often when it was too late, e.g.. after severe crisis, exhaustion, and breakdown.

Over the past decades, the family has undergone a significant structural and functional transformation in many regions of the world.

Its traditional role of being the provider of daily care and support of its older members, is being subjected to severe economic, social and psychological strains.

These demographic, economic and social pressures on the traditional family's structure, functions and kin relationships on the one hand, and the dramatic population aging on the other, are inevitably leading to an increased awareness of the fact that the needs of the older population can no longer be met by the family alone without the support of specialised programmes and services from the formal sector.

These, in turn, should complement family care and at the same time reduce the burden on the family.

Policy-makers should deeply recognise the fact that unless family traditions of mutual aid and support are strengthened, a vast service infrastructure will be required to replace and expand the informal care-giving.

RIS emphasises the fact that “a more equal sharing of caring responsibilities between men and women should be promoted through public policies and other means”.

There is ample evidence that the modern social pressures which are undermining the traditional forms of care and support, are leaving increasingly large numbers of older persons with hardly any supportive care at all.

Governments should be careful not to repeat the past experience of a number of countries which considered institutionalisation as the best principal societal response to their dependent older citizens.

Such a strategy resulted in emarginating older persons from the community at large and usually entailed a surrender of personal independence.

Older persons were being relegated to mere passive observers and deprived of the opportunity to participate in and to contribute to the very development process of their countries.

RIS emphasises the fact that “where institutionalisation is unavoidable, it is imperative that the dignity and individuality of the older person be respected”.

Moreover “Geriatric and gerontological assessment is an effective instrument to determine whether institutionalisation is required”.

The continued involvement of older persons within their families should be more than encouraged.

Governments, while trying to support and strengthen the family's traditional role, must at the same time, provide public delivery systems for those older persons who cannot rely on themselves or on their families.

While formal services could play a more significant role, they should only supplement rather than replace informal care.

A major issue which governments have to tackle is precisely to strike a proper balance between the formal and the informal support services for older persons within their population.

The services, by providing care and support where the family and the individual are unable to manage alone, help maintain older persons in the community and enable families to cope, thus preventing or at least delaying the needs for institutional care.

It is wrong to consider older persons only as receivers of care. Many of them are also care givers.

“It is necessary to recognise and support the contribution of older persons in family care”.

EMPOWERMENT. Older persons especially those who are dependent on care are to be involved “in the design, implementation, delivery and evaluation of policies and programmes” aimed at improving their health and well-being.

“ Older persons should, where possible have the right to choose between different options of long-term care”. They “need to be made aware of the range of social and health services available in their country”.

EDUCATION AND TRAINING: “The ageing of populations in the region requires that formal and informal care providers possess adequate professional as well as personal qualifications and skills”.

“Education and on-going training programmes for professionals in the field of health care and social services at all levels should be offered and enhanced”.

Education and training are not to be restricted to the formal and informal care providers but also to the older persons themselves.

“The quality of life and independence of older persons through self-care, health promotion, prevention of disease and disability requires new orientation and skills among older persons themselves”.

All those concerned are to facilitate the adoption of healthy life-styles. “This should be achieved through a range of policies, including appropriate information campaigns and education starting at an early age”.

THANK YOU